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Revealing Roots: Ecocriticism and the Cultures of Antiquity

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Afterword

Revealing Roots – Ecocriticism and the Cultures of Antiquity

Serenella Iovino

Physis kryptesthai philei. Nature loves to hide. As he entered Artemis's temple in Ephesus to offer his book as a dedication to the great goddess of the wild lands, "Mistress of the Animals" (Hom. *Il.* 21.470f.), Heraclitus couldn't guess that, crossing oceans of time and thousands of books written by others, this enigmatic statement was starting a long journey – passing through future languages, future alphabets, future media. It was the sixth century BCE, and the book Heraclitus was depositing had an intriguing subject, one of those that seem to be made exactly to stir the discussions of a community of scholars who, some two-and-a-half thousand years later, would call themselves "ecocritics." The book's title was *Perì physeos*, "On nature."

For the thinkers who happened to be active before Socrates's glory (and who certainly ignored to be "Pre-Socratic") this was not at all an original title. Parmenides, Anaximander, Empedocles: all of them had given this very heading to their works – mostly a mixed genre of poetry and philosophy – inaugurating a habit that continued for several centuries, all the way to Epicurus and Lucretius. But was this concept really as simple as this apparently generic title? As Pierre Hadot has observed in a famous study titled *The Veil of Isis*, translating "*physis*" is not an easy task, above all because this term is not best rendered with "nature." For Heraclitus as well as for his Pre-Socratic fellows (often called "*physiologoi*," investigators of *physis*), "*physis*" could signify "the constitution or proper nature of each thing [as opposed to nature as a whole]," and also "a thing's process of realization, genesis, appearance, or growth" (Hadot 2006, 7), namely, "birth" or "the process of birth" (8). Yet, engrained in this process of birth and growth typical of the "constitution" of all things, is also the process of declining and dying: "The form that appears tends to disappear," Hadot writes (9). This luminous ground in which all things appear and come to light – and here the tie between *physis*

and the stems of *phaos* (“light”), and *phainesthai*, *phainomena* (“appear,” “appearances”) cannot be overlooked – is also an obscure abyss, causing Heraclitus’s fragment to express the “astonishment before the mystery of metamorphosis and of the deep identity of life and death” (11). Despite our clichés about antique ecological imagination, *this* nature had therefore nothing or little to do with the quiet beauty of an Arcadian idyll, with flourishing landscapes punctuated by sun-bleached architectures, and with the lush of “green ecology.” Also for those ancient sages, *physis* was at the same time hidden and revealed, a “strange stranger” at once intimate and alien, appearing and disappearing through and with all its endless forms.¹ Even in its love for hiding, *physis* was thus always already *apocalyptic*, where “apocalypse” means exactly this: a revelation.

With the intention of clearing that old imagination from our reassuring clichés, *Ecocriticism, Ecology, and the Cultures of Antiquity* contributes to this process of revelation – and it does so by reminding us that the mission of every critical enterprise is to provide a new opening into things. This is even truer for ecocriticism, whose critical struggle can be effectively summarized by these lines of Bertrand Westphal: “*Le réel est dans le texte, comme le texte est dans le monde. Le rejet du hors-texte par les structuralistes fut une abstraite illusion, de même que l’emprisonnement du texte de fiction dans un univers de papier*” (2005, 11). By reading world and text together, ecocriticism tries indeed to re-connect what is real and what is thought, things and stories – especially if by “world” and “things” we mean the emergences of *physis* and the intersections between the human and the nonhuman dimension. Compared to those ancient times, what is new today is the prospect: a landscape of matter, life, and imagination crisscrossed by multiple predicaments that we subsume under the label of “ecological crisis.” Safe from feelings of subsidiarity, though, ecocriticism provides new keys to rethink what has already been thought for centuries or millennia, starting – exactly like the *physiologoi* did – with the imaginative and physical horizon of our being-in-the-world.

But how feasible is it to cross new landscapes with an eye to old charts? With *Ecocriticism, Ecology, and the Cultures of Antiquity*, Christopher Schliephake proposes a challenge: the challenge to see how far *back* ecocriticism’s canon can stretch. If ecocriticism in general is a way to critically articulate the imagination of our *oikos*, the task of an historical reconsideration of the discipline’s borders is to enter the complex reality of this very imagination, examining its ecology of mind and bodies, its discourses and narratives, its mythologies and factual realities, and using them in ways which might practically and theoretically enrich the scope and potentialities of ecocritical analyses. Nobody would dispute that, as Schliephake insists, “antiquity is a hidden presence in our own cultural fabrics to which we are inextricably connected.”

Even more, then, a reappraisal of the critical and creative power of this presence appears a necessary step to disclose old threads that were involuntarily obscured as our field was consolidating its identity by stressing its knots with the current ecological quandaries and urgencies. No longer preoccupied to legitimate eco-cultural discourse, this book can afford to recuperate those old threads and be conversant with their still echoing urges, finally moving toward an effective “integration of the cultures of antiquity into our current ecocritical theory and practice.”

Although heard so many times, these latter words – “ecocritical theory and practice” – strike me here as particularly important. In fact, if every hermeneutical effort hides – or reveals – a hermeneutical methodology, the core of this operation resonates in this book with essential trends and theoretical developments of our debate. With originality and scholarly clarity, Schliephake is broadening the operation initiated by Jeffrey J. Cohen, Karl Steel, Eileen Joy, Lowell Duckert, Steve Mentz and others important scholars to think ecocriticism not only beyond its canonical tropes, but also *before* its (tacitly normative) chronological borders. With their collective endeavors, started around the journal *postmedieval* and growing in remarkable collections, Cohen and his fellow eco-medievalists and early modernists have extended the chronological span of ecocritical analysis, at the same time contributing to change the very nature of ecocriticism.² Not only did they pull the Middle Ages and the Renaissance into the ecocritical debate, but they also transformed the practice and theory of ecocriticism by reading medieval and early modern tropes through cutting-edge contemporary philosophies and theoretical paradigms such as postcolonialism, posthumanism, object-oriented-ontology, and new materialisms. *Ecocriticism, Ecology, and the Cultures of Antiquity* goes along this line, and it does so by pitting its panorama of ancient ideas, subjects, and authors, against the most recent research in urban ecology, speculative realism, revisited pastoralism, Mediterranean ecocriticism, posthumanism, material ecocriticism, and most of all cultural ecology, now finally being recognized in its status of major school of eco-theory.³ The very idea of reintegrating the cultures of antiquity into the contemporary environmental humanities debate appears, indeed, perfectly in line with a cultural-ecological effort to reveal elements and voices that have long been “hidden” or “marginalized” in ecocritical analysis – maybe only for lack of adequate scholarship or for reasons of incommunicability between academic departments.

The proposal to reconnect the environmental humanities with its ancient roots is not entirely new, though. In his “Neo-Presocratic Manifesto,” published in 2013, Baird Callicott claimed that the “philosophy of the future [...] is NeoPresocratic” (Callicott 2013, 170). Those ancient thinkers, he insisted, “expanded the scope of philosophy to include epistemology, ethics,

and political theory as well as nature” (170) and did so in a way that can be considered an excellent “remediation” not to only ontological binary thinking, but also to the Two-Cultures divide pointed out by C.P. Snow in the early 1960s. Actually, however, long before Callicott’s “Manifesto,” Joseph Meeker – one of the veritable harbingers of ecocriticism – had made the study of ancient texts the ground of his theory of “literary ecology.” In his famous 1972 book, in fact, Meeker began his explorations into the evolutionary function of literary texts with a reference to the aesthetic doctrines of ancient philosophers (Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Poetics*) and with a detailed comparative analysis of Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King* and John Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy*. Then, he developed his idea of “the comedy of survival” directly from the stems of ancient comedy. So Meeker:

“The Greek demigod Comus, whose name was probably the origin of the word comedy, was a god of fertility in a large but unpretentious sense. His concerns included the ordinary sexual fertility of plants, men, and animals, and also the general success of family and community life insofar as these depend on biological processes. Comus was content to leave matters of great intellectual import to Apollo and gigantic passions to Dionysus while he busied himself with the maintenance of the commonplace conditions that are friendly to life. Maintaining equilibrium among living beings and restoring it once it had been lost, are Comus’s special talents (...). Literary comedy depicts the loss of equilibrium and its recovery. Wherever the normal processes of life are obstructed unnecessarily, the comic mode seeks to return to normal” (Meeker 1996 [1972], 159).

Without this foray into the precursory (and mythical) roots of the genre, here marinated in Darwinian sauce, it’s unlikely that Meeker could have elaborated what can be considered the core of ecocriticism and one of the most interesting contributions to the area of bio-cultural studies.

In our book, this conversation continues, and the apparent “lack of scholarship” mentioned above is instead brilliantly filled by the authors. Eminent critics and younger specialists, have indeed contributed intellectually challenging chapters on topics as diverse as human-nonhuman interactions in mosaics, forest aesthetic, ancient anthropogenic disasters, eroticized environments, interspecies ethics in Lucretius’s poem, pastoral, agriculture, ancient environmental ethics, speculative emblematics, the “sustainability” of classical reception, and an ecofeminist reading of ancient Welsh myths (and this latter case is particularly praiseworthy, since it denotes the book’s non-exclusive focus on Greco-Roman antiquity). *Ecocriticism, Ecology, and the Cultures of Antiquity* has therefore a double commendable function: not only does it enlarge the borders of ecocritical synopsis up to encompass antiquity, but it also shows how deeply ancient ecologies of matters and ideas can contribute to the development, theoretical and thematic, of ecocriticism.

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Including antiquity in the critical tool bag of ecocriticism is important also for another remarkable reason. It makes us think about roots. The Mediterranean world is one of these. The ancient roots of European history and culture (a European culture before Europe itself existed) lie predominantly in this amphibian region, where elements and visions have crossed and mixed with each other in meaningful ways since time immemorial. Seen with the eyes of the ecocritic, all this discloses a number of potential attractors: crossings of landscape and natural experience, the elemental embodiment of universal life, the search for a principle of cosmic analogies, expressed in the materiality of a poetry conceived as a musing about *physis*.⁴

But origins are not simply those connected to the emerging of our presence from a historical setting. They are also about the way we come to think what we say, and that ancient (and beneficial) art called etymology may be helpful in understanding this process. To overcome the culture/nature dualism, for example, there is no better way – along with reading Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour, obviously! – than plunging into the *radical* meaning of these two words, and of “culture” in particular. “Culture” comes from the Latin *colere*, which literally signifies “cultivate.” Culture is, thus, a variety of *farming* parallel to agri-culture, the culture of the fields. Speaking and thought – in Greek *legein* and *logos* – are also terms derived from a very material practice: that of tying (*legein* as well⁵) things in a bundle, for example hay, wheat, barley. When we think and speak, we collect and *logically* (from *logos*) organize crops called “concepts” (from “conceive” – here comes *physis* again!), ideas (from the stem “(v)*id-*,” “see”). We cultivate these concepts and ideas, and store them into a deposit we call memory.

Besides underlining the radical embeddedness of culture into the first agricultural societies, etymology gives us the evidence that what we consider theoretical activities are indeed deeply material: materially engrained into the cycles of seasons, into the practices of sowing, tending, harvesting, and warehousing crops for the winter and for times of scarcity – something which is perfectly referable to both food and critical thought. But this might also suggest that, at a certain moment of history, agriculture estranged nature from our “family,” forming in us the perception of being the only active agents of these cycles.⁶ A manipulated nature was not able to reveal itself anymore: like Proserpina/Persephone, symbol of the fertility’s cycle, it was forced to hide. And maybe this very hiding was the cause of the *nostalgia* (again, a Greek word, meaning a very physical pain for a very physical condition: that of travelling far away from home), which reflects in the activity of the *physiologi* and in all the many Odysseys written (and experienced) over the millennia. Finally, a word on poetry. The Greek *poieisis* is another concept profoundly rooted in materiality. Its roots are the same of the verb *poieo*, “I do, I make.” Which, again, suggests that, in principle, there is nothing abstract in *poieisis*.

Poiesis is something material, and as such endowed with a form of independent agency. It is not only a human activity, but it relates to everything that is in-the-making. In a word, *physis*. *Poiesis* is the way *physis* manifests itself causing things to be made. Articulated in its material imagination of ever-emerging forms, *physis* is “poietic:” it is a sort of first, radical form of poetry, a *poiesis* qua universal creativity – a poietic cosmovision, like the ones that still enliven the cultural and political discourse of indigenous communities, especially in the Amazons.⁷

The narratives arising from this universal *poiesis* are stories of returns and encounters, like the ones that Empedocles of Acragas identified in the incessant combinations of earth water, air, and fire – all tied, mixed, and finally untied by the opposed and concurring passions of love and strife. As his philosophy also shows, the “ecological thought” of antiquity – if any – was certainly embedded in a universe in which dualism and monism coexisted. Gods weren’t scared to assume forms of humans, of elements, of nonhuman animals. The epitome of this is Ovid’s work, whose dimension is one of unremitting porosity among all these forms. Writing on “Ovid and universal contiguity” in *Why Read the Classics?* Italo Calvino says:

this is a universe in which space is densely packed with forms which constantly swap size and nature, while the flow of time is continually filled by a proliferation of tales and cycles of tales. Earthly forms and stories repeat heavenly ones, but both intertwine around each other in a double spiral. This contiguity between gods and humans (...) is simply a specific instance of the contiguity that exists between all the figures and forms of the existing world, whether anthropomorphic or otherwise. The fauna and flora, the mineral world and the firmament encompass within their common substance that collection of corporeal, psychological and moral qualities which we usually consider human (Calvino 2009, 25–26).

Matter and stories, *physis* and its elemental narratives come together over and over again. In these elemental stories, the “ego,” the human self, is a random emergence on a plot in which matters and forms slip into one another: “For there was a time when I was boy and girl, thicket and bird, and a scaly fish in the waves,” Empedocles said.⁸ In Ovid as in other authors, this “universal contiguity” is not only that of the borderless loves of Jupiter, but also the universe of innumerable figures, intermediate between the higher gods and humans: semi-gods, fauns, nymphs, all are *traits d’union* between different but connecting natural realms, of which the human – this discursive animal, *zoon logon echon*, as Aristotle called it – was part. This ontological porosity of realms resonates in our ecocritical visions now, in the works of posthumanist thinkers, animal studies scholars, bio- and zoosemioticians, material

ecocritics, vital materialists, and ecophenomenologists. The big difference here is that this cosmic hybridity was even more radical **of** evolutionism **—** whether Lamarckian or Darwinian: it expressed the radical continuity of imagination and reality – *phantasia* being the very core of matter.

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Years ago, introducing what they called “third wave of ecocriticism,” Joni Adamson and Scott Slovic, titled an essay “The Shoulders We Stand On.” The shoulders they had in mind were the array of multiethnic voices, of indigenous communities and creativities, to which we owe big part of the ecological struggles about environmental justice. But what if we ecocritics come to finally admit that the shoulders on which we stand were the shoulders of ancient thinkers and writers, too? What if these shoulders, to borrow James Clifford’s (1997) insightful pun, were the *roots* which, instead of keeping us forever immovably in the same place, indicate **instead** an open *route* – roots that, instead of keeping us stopped, liberate our steps toward new pathways? As this book also shows, the cultures of antiquities, in their own ways, did also explore “all facets of human experience from an environmental viewpoint” (Adamson and Slovic 2009, 7). They mirrored worlds full of cosmic creativity and at the same time fraught with tensions: ethnic struggles, social iniquities, huge migratory processes, ecological transformations **—** which involved both the landscape (with significant deforestations) and animal biodiversity (with the massive killing of exotic animals which progressively lead to the extinction of entire species in the Mediterranean). It was a world that created the concept of catastrophe to signify a sudden change in the state of things; and the concept of apocalypse to mean the revelatory power of these changes.

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It might be true that *physis* loves to hide. But ecocriticism, going back to its radical voices, can be the door to new, unexpected revelations. Because there’s so much we can still learn from the ancients about nature, and this book is here to “pave the way.”

NOTES

1. “Strange stranger” is a concept developed by Timothy Morton (2010b).
2. See for example J.J. Cohen’s edited volumes *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green*. Minneapolis (2013) and *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects* (2012) and Cohen’s own monograph *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (2015). Simon Estok, too, although in a somehow less programmatic way, has significantly contributed to de-ossify the ecocritical canon with his important *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare: Reading Ecophobia* (2011).
3. Cf. especially Hubert Zapf’s *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts* (2016b) and his edited *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology* (2016a).

4. For a more articulated treatment of this point, see my theoretical essay on “Mediterranean Ecocriticism” (Iovino 2013) and Elena Past’s 2016 contribution “Mediterranean Ecocriticism: The Sea in the Middle.”

5. Here equivalent to the Italian *legare*, Spanish *ligar*, French *lier*.

6. On the connection between culture and the first agricultural societies, see Shepard (1998) and Diamond (1997).

7. See Adamson 2014. I would like to thank the poet Juan Carlos Galeano for the insightful conversations on this topic.

8. Empedocles, Fr. 117: ἤδη γάρ ποτ’ ἐγὼ γένομην κοῦρός τε κόρη τε θάμνος τ’ οἰωνός τε καὶ ἔξαιλος ἔλλοπος ἰχθύς. My translation.